The Vedic vision of God

An Article by Swami Dayananda Saraswati | Version 1.01

The Vedic vision of God is unique. Although the topic of God is not meant to be open for notions or speculation, we find that the concept of God differs from person to person and from religion to religion. If there is a God, why is there so much difference in how people view that God? The answer is very clear. God is one being whom one doesn't know, and yet, whom one cannot but say something about.

Vedanta, which is found at the end of the four Vedas, has something to say about God. In fact, it is the means of knowledge, or *pramāṇa*, available to know things that I cannot know through any other means—perception, inference and presumption. Although *pramāṇa* is generally translated as 'authority', the literal translation is 'that which is instrumental in giving knowledge'—*pramāyāḥ karaṇam*. *Pramā* or *mā* means 'knowledge'. The suffix *ana* (*lyuṭ*) indicates the *karaṇam*, or means. The Veda is a separate means of knowledge because the subject matter of the Veda consists of those things to which my senses and other means of knowledge have no access. Each means of knowledge is independent and self-proving. For instance, both my eyes and ears are *pramāṇas*. However, the knowledge that my eyes can provide, the ears cannot provide, and conversely, the information that my ears can provide, my eyes cannot. Also, what is understood by inference is generally not available for perception at the time the inference is made. Similarly, there are certain things talked about in the Veda to which we otherwise have no access. Therefore, the Veda is looked upon as a *pramāṇa*.

> *Even the person who dismisses God is only dismissing his own concept of God. Being a rational person, he has got to dismiss that concept.*

Why don't we leave God alone? God is the most abused being. In fact, it takes nothing less than God to be able to handle the abuse that God is subject to. We call him names: God is a punisher; God is terrible. Yet at the same time, he is also very loving. Various theologies give us the double message. "He loves you; be careful." It is something like saying, "I love you; get out of my sight." To a worldly authority you can apply for leniency, but God does not seem to be available for mercy petitions. Here, at least you may be able to get help from a human rights

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organization if you are subjected to capital punishment. You may get a last minute reprieve. Not so when you are subject to God's sentence. You go to Hell forever. It is amazing that there are theologians who try to establish that when God says, "Go to Hell!" he really means it.

Thus, people have different concepts of God. Even the person who says, "I don't believe in God," is only dismissing his concept of God. When asked which God he is talking about, he will say, "You know, the God who sits in heaven and dropped down all these planets—I don't believe in that God." I would agree with that person that such a God doesn't exist. In fact, I would prove it. Such a God is, therefore, not a matter for belief or non-belief. Even the person who dismisses God is only dismissing his own concept of God. Being a rational person, he has got to dismiss that concept. But whether dismissed or not, one always has some concept of God.

You can't really avoid the question, "What is God?" because it is a part of your psyche.

You can't really avoid the question, "What is God?" because it is a part of your psyche. Whether you have dismissed or accepted God, his existence remains a mystery to you, for you find yourself in a given scheme of things that consists of certain laws. These laws are many and varied but they do form a universe. You can, perhaps, even reduce this entire universe to mathematical equations. You can have differing standpoints based on these equations and derive different models of the universe. One thing is very clear, however: whatever be the standpoint, there is a given world, a given scheme of things. And in the scheme of things you find you are a person, an individual. This individual has certain endowments, a physical body that is alive, was born alive, is capable of growing into adulthood, and is subject to aging and passing away. These are given facts. When I look at this body I find it consists of certain laws. The body is caused by, and is subject to, certain biological laws. There also are physiological laws

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that govern the body, and there are definitely psychological laws. So, too, there are laws governing your ability to remember, to recall. There are laws governing your knowing and not knowing. All these laws can be brought under one word: 'order'. There is a physical order outside, a biological order, a physiological order, a psychological order, and there is an intellectual or epistemological order. All these constitute one huge order that is given.

Within this order, you have a certain freedom. As a human being, you are endowed with a freedom to desire, a freedom to will, which you call 'free will'. And you have the freedom to act, to accomplish, which is also an endowment. In this order I have the power to know, to explore. That power, the faculty of knowledge, is given to me—it is not something that I gather later. All of these are given—the seat of emotion, the faculty of knowing, the sense organs, and so on. In order for me to see this world as well as I do, my physical body/mind/sense complex is implied by, is part of, this given universe. And when I increase my knowledge and see the world more clearly, both that capacity and that knowledge are also given.

So much is given, in fact, that no one can say that he or she has created anything. Nobody can claim to be the sole author of anything, including a person who has discovered something not known before. For instance, in fundamental scientific research, a person may discover a law, a phenomenon not previously known. Perhaps his name is attached to the discovery. Yet we still cannot say that he is the sole author because his very faculty to know, to discover, was already given. And there must be something already there for him to discover. Further, the people who had worked on the project until then also have to be acknowledged. The prior generations of effort, exploration, research and discoveries, mistakes, corrections—all these are supporting him. He has a better view of things because he is standing on the shoulders of these prior generations. His being in a certain time and place to be able to take advantage of all the prior knowledge, is given to him. And so he makes a discovery. How can he say "I am the sole author"? Thus, nobody is the author of anything. That is why you will find that many works in Sanskrit don't even have authors. They are all anonymous. The authors cannot be traced, but that does not matter, because the writers knew they were not the authors. They understood that

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they were endowed with certain potentials, which are given. Even the fact that there is a potential is given. And that you have the capacity to tap a potential is given. So the most you can say is that you can tap a potential.

You find yourself in a given world with a given body/mind/sense complex. This is the truth that nobody can deny. That is why the child asks the fundamental question: "Dad, tell me, who made all this?" Dad can only say what he himself was told when he was young and never questioned afterwards. When he was young, he was told that God made all this, and nobody questions that further. His grand-dad also confirmed what his father said. But the boy is not satisfied. He persists with questions: "Where is that God? Have you seen him?" The father says, "I have not seen him; I hope to see him. He is in heaven." The Indian father's statement that God in heaven created this world, is a literal interpretation of such of Vedic statements as: *divitiṣṭhāni sarvaṃ karoti*. "Situated in *divi*, he made everything." God is *divi-tiṣṭha*, but a literal interpretation may not be the intended one. *Divi* can mean 'in heaven', or, more appropriately here, 'in his own effulgence.' Thus, the correct translation would be, "Being rooted in his own effulgence, he created everything." Unfortunately, it is taken literally as meaning "God in heaven created this world," resulting in a cosmological and psychological split. And it is propounded from every pulpit as such.

You find yourself in a given world with a given body/mind/sense complex. That is why the child asks the fundamental question: "Dad, tell me, who made all this?"

The question of God is never given up. Do you know why? The question is simply lying there, dormant, because, as a rational being, you seek an answer. And you can never dismiss your own reason.

Thus a son or daughter, maybe as young as four or five years old, will ask: "Who created heaven, Dad?" Dad, very serious, says "God." "Dad, who created heaven?" "God created heaven." "Where was God before God created heaven?" And the child has to come up with the

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only answer possible: hell. God in hell created heaven. Hell was so hot, he couldn't really sit there. To air condition all of hell is a hell of a job, and therefore, God went to heaven and kept hell for certain people. Still the questioning continues: "Who created hell?" Finally he has to say that God created hell. "Where was God before he created this hell?" The only answer Dad has left is this: "Shut up. You ask too many questions." Whenever you cannot answer, you use authority to stifle further questions. Using abusive language when you cannot answer is an old trick.

But that nascent, growing mind, with a freshness of its own, cannot easily give up the questioning. For a long time the child persists before giving up. Then he shuts his mouth and mind about that fundamental topic, that inevitable question. Later, he may conclude that God cannot be known, saying, "I am an agnostic. I don't say God is; I don't say that God is not." He relegates the topic to the background, behind more important questions like how much he has on his credit card. When it comes to whether God exists, his mind is wide open and can go in any direction, like a freeway.

But at least he doesn't just say, "I know where God is—he is in heaven." That person has stopped thinking and just believes what he was told. The question, however, is never given up. Do you know why? The question is simply lying there, dormant, because, as a rational being, you seek an answer. And you can never dismiss your own reason. There was a person who claimed, "You should not be too rational." I asked him why. "Because that makes life miserable," he said. He used reason in giving me the reason for his conclusion, and argued with me for one-and-a-half hours, just to prove that he is not rational. It was quite amazing. Basically, you are a rational person because *viveka*, discrimination, is your basic endowment. And it is arguably your greatest endowment. It makes the difference between a questioning person and a non-questioning person. We cannot simply just go about conducting our lives, leaving this question about God to the philosophers or to some swamis to discuss. That is not possible because this question very much affects your personal life.

> *This question very much affects your personal life. Unless this question is answered to some extent, you will feel insecure and uncertain about yourself.*

Unless this question is answered to some extent, you will feel insecure and uncertain about yourself. Everyone is born helpless, and to compensate, everyone is born with a capacity to trust totally. Whichever pair of hands picked the baby up—that pair of hands was trusted totally by the child, thank God. A baby does not have distrust or mistrust—it has total trust. It has to, because it is helpless. If you are helpless, you have to seek help. That is intelligent living. And when somebody offers help, you need to be able to trust that person. If somebody offers help but you don't trust him at all, then what would be the result? A baby is born helpless and therefore, it needs to trust. It trusts totally, but slowly it loses the trust. That is because for the growing child, dad and mom are infallible, almighty—until there is a cockroach. Then the child runs to mother, thinking mother is infallible and that she will take care of it. In fact, only after running to mother would the child even look at the insect. When the child is with its with mother, there is no problem—it looks at the roach. That means the child trusts mother. Then the mother calls dad. "Don't worry, I'll call Dad." This is how the erosion of trust begins. So, mom is fallible. But then, dad must be infallible. And dad—a big guy, comes and says, "Oh, that's only a cockroach—don't worry." He phones the fire department!

These concepts of God that are floating around are really damaging to a human being's psychological well being.

I am just given an exaggerated example. But this is how the child loses trust. You lose trust, and afterwards, all your life, you are searching for the infallible. In fact, your whole life is a search for the infallible, and unless you discover the infallible, you are insecure. But the concepts of God, that we hear about from various religious pulpits are only fallible; they exhibit traits which even humans are exhorted to overcome. I have been told that I cannot afford to be judgmental. But God himself is presented as judgmental. On judgment day, he will judge you. When we present this God as judgmental, where is the infallibility? How a person can be judgmental and still be infallible? And what is the basis of his judgment?

These concepts of God that are floating around are really damaging to a human being's psychological well being. God is presented as all good things, and all the opposite qualities are

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said to belong to the devil, Satan. Thus you have a vertical division right in your psyche. The person, the personality, is divided. And due to that split, you feel you can't afford to have jealousy because if you feel jealous, then the devil has entered into you. But still, you do have jealousy due to some psychological reasons—perhaps due to circumstances when you were growing up. When somebody gets something that you don't, then you feel jealous. You may say, "I am not." Then what are you? "I only feed sad." Why do you feel sad? "Because I don't get what others get." What does that mean? All right, you feel sad—do you enjoy the other person's happiness, at least? "No, I can't enjoy the other person being happy. I get angry." That is called jealousy—the affliction arising on seeing another's excellence is jealousy, *para-utkṛṣṭam drstvā jāyamānas santāpaḥ mātsaryam*. This *santāpa*, sorrow, that occurs when you see another person being happy is defined as jealousy. At least, you think he is happy. In your jealousy, you cannot but think he is happy, yet that may not be true. If you were to ask that person, he might tell you otherwise. From this we can understand that all of this is our own projection. We think that others are happy, which is not totally true, and therefore, we feel jealous. We can get rid of that jealousy, but not by bracketing jealousy as Satan's doing. Satan is not sitting somewhere, pushing jealousy into your head, deciding, "Let this fellow have jealousy today. Let him have some hatred today." There is no such vertical division. If there were a Satan, even he could not be separate from God. By definition, such a Satan could not exist.

> *In fact, your whole life is a search for the infallible, and unless you discover the infallible, you are insecure.*

The Vedic vision of God is a whole vision, without such a split. And although it is a fact, not simply an option that one may choose, there is a necessity to qualify it as 'Vedic', for the unfortunate reason that there are dualistic versions of God. And the truth is that there cannot be many versions of God. Like the fact that one plus one equals two, the truth about the nature of God is not open for accommodation. You cannot choose to have one plus one equal three. That is not a cultural option. It is not like choosing a style of music. For instance, both Indian music and Western music have their own beauty. One is not greater than the other, and if you think

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that one is greater than the other, it just means that you don't understand the other. Things are different and we have to take them as they are; we try to understand them. When that is the case, each style is valid. Music is open to your choice, but the sum of one plus one is not. It is two. You can't say, "In my country, one plus one equals three", or "In my culture, one plus one is four."

So, too, there is no such option about the truth of God. If God is a reality, then definitely I have to discover that. The Veda tells me, "All this, whatever moves in the world, is to be [understood as] pervaded by *Īśvara*, *īśāvāsyam idaṃ sarvaṃ yat kiñcit jagatyāṃ jagat*, "All that is here is *Īśvara*," is the opening sentence of the *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad*, which is generally listed first in the tradition of study. It is not that this *Upaniṣad* is more important than the others, but the ten *Upaniṣads* are usually listed in the order: *Īśa*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Praśna*, *Muṇḍaka*, *Māṇḍūkya*, *Taittirīya*, *Aitareya*, *Chāndogya*, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*. Each *Upaniṣad* contains a different dialogue, and since they are found at the end of the four Vedas, they are called Vedanta. It is said in the *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad, īśāvāsyam idaṃ sarvaṃ*, "All that is here is *Īśvara*. Therefore, look at it as such." For your own sanity, look at all that is here as *Īśvara*. There is nothing other than *Īśvara*. Look at that. The Veda is not saying that there is one God; it says there is only God. If you do not see that, you have to prove that it is not true. It is not a matter of belief.

> *If God is a reality, then definitely I have to discover that. The Veda tells me "All that is here is Īśvara. Therefore, look at it as such."*

When I look at this given body/mind/sense complex, I definitely find that what I thought was hardware is nothing but software. This is an amazing thing. When I go to the level of quantum physics, I understand that there is only software—the whole thing is knowledge. When I examine the cell, it just opens up new areas for me to know. This cell is governed by the

laws of biology—in fact, the cell is biology, and as such, it has properties in common with all other cells. For instance, there is not a separate, isolated pack of cells for Swami Dayananda. And it is not that the swami's cells are different, holy cells while the cells of people who are not swamis are unholy cells. There is no such difference. The cells are the same. Even though I am called "His Holiness", receiving letters addressed to "H.H. Swami Dayananda", I like to think of 'H.H' as meaning "Holy Hobo." I even have a T-shirt which says "Holy Hobo". In America, a hobo is a person with no bank account, no job, no family. Then, how does a hobo live? Like a *sādhu,* a mendicant. There is nothing special or holy about the cells that make up Swami Dayananda. All cells are governed by the same biological laws. There is no such thing as holy as opposed to unholy. In fact, either everything is holy, or there is no such thing as holy. Not only is there a commonality, but all the structures I see are intelligently arranged. If I just look at the physical body, I see it consists of parts that are put together intelligently. If I look at a plant or this tent in which we are all sitting, I find they are intelligently put together. If the tent were unintelligently put together, it would collapse.

> *When I look at this given body/mind/sense complex, I definitely find that what I thought was hardware is nothing but software—the whole thing is knowledge.*

So, too, my physical body is intelligently put together. No one can simply create a pair of eyes if mine need replacement. While organs cannot be created, some, such as the kidneys, can be replaced through transplantation. Transplantation is a possibility in the scheme of things. This is all intelligently put together, with the possibility of transplantation. Where something is intelligently put together, we don't take it for granted. Even though you don't see the person who has the intelligence which put it all together, you cannot but recognize that there is such a being. For instance, suppose you ask me, "Who put this tent together?" and I tell you, "Oh, yesterday, it just sprang up. We thought it would be nice to have a tent, so we thought of a tent and it sprang up." Perhaps some people may believe that, because anything can pass as truth in

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this world. However, in this campus, we don't let it pass. We question. In studying the knowledge of the Rishis or seers, we learn to question in order to see the essential truth.

Since we see that the universe, including my body/mind/sense complex, is intelligently arranged, we cannot but appreciate that there is an intelligent being, regardless of whether we think he is here, there, or elsewhere. The physical body is a marvel. It is not meant to give you complexes. It is meant to serve you, but it has become a locus of complexes. That I am black; that I am not blond, may give rise to complexes in certain cultures. Or that I am blonde may be a problem in other cultures. People do have complexes, all because of ignorance. There is a self-judgment because of a certain basic ignorance, which implies the ignorance of God, as well. In fact, the basic ignorance is ignorance of God. This physical body, with the mind and senses organs, with all its faculties, is a marvelous piece of creation. 'Creation' only means that it is intelligently put together. It does not mean that God dropped it down from somewhere else. The fact that it is intelligently arranged implies an intelligent being, a conscious being. That conscious being must have the knowledge of what is going to be created because creation presupposes knowledge. Knowledge has to rest in a conscious being. When we talk about the total creation, then that conscious being must have the knowledge of all; he must be *sarvajña,* all knowing, *sarvavit sarvajñaḥ iti,* the one who knows everything (in detail) is *sarvajña* (omniscient). The Veda tells us that God is all-knowing in terms of all details.

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> *Then we may ask where God found the material to make this world.*

Then we may ask where God found the material to make this world. He could not have borrowed from anybody, because there was nobody else to borrow it from—everybody had yet to be created. He has to find the material only in himself. Therefore, in keeping with the nature

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of the reality of the world, there must be a material cause. We call that material cause *prakṛti*, and it is not separate from the being, *puruṣa*. The Lord has to have that power. As to the question of where God abides, there is no 'where' for God. The question of 'where' doesn't come into the picture, because space and time have not yet been created. The fact that the Lord is the one who is the maker as well as the material cause opens up a new vision for me. Anything created from a material is not going to be independent of that material, like the shirt that you wear. If your shirt is made of cotton fabric, you cannot remove the cotton fabric and still be wearing a shirt. Your clothes are made of the fabric. If you remove the fabric, where are the clothes? Only emperor's clothes may be there. The shirt is fabric, and there is no shirt apart from fabric, much less is there fabric without yarn. There is no yarn without fibers, and there are no fibers without molecules, nor are there molecules without atoms. You can go on and on, but anything created is not separate from the material of which it is made.

All the five elements, which include space and time, are the universe, and the universe is not other than the Lord.

In the model that is presented by the *Veda*, the five elements: space, which includes time, air, fire, water and earth, subtle and gross, manifested from *Īśvara* and constitute this universe. And this universe includes your body/mind/sense complex. The first of these elements, which manifested from *Īśvara*, the cause, is space. "From that [Brahman] which is this self arose the space" (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.1.1). That's why space is worshipped. Time is also worshipped in India. Thus, all the five elements, which include space and time, are the universe, and the universe is not other than the Lord. The Veda does not say there is one God. It says there is only God.

There is one more thing that is included in this vision—you, the one who is aware of, conscious of, the five elements. That conscious, awareful being is also *Īśvara*, the Lord. And this consciousness, although in and through the universe consisting of the five elements, is of a

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different order of reality. Everything that is here is *Īśvara* alone; it is not separate from *Īśvara*. Therefore, may you look upon it all as *Īśvara*, *īśāvāsyam idaṃ sarvaṃ*.

When that is understood, you will find that everything is holy; there is nothing unholy. It is only we who choose to see unholiness in the holy. We are given the faculty of choice. The more we accept *Īśvara* in our life, the more order there will be. Even our jealousy, and other emotions are within *Īśvara*'s order alone, and if we see that, even jealousy will disappear. Since all these emotions are within the order, there is no need to condemn yourself. You will find that your intellect and mind are pervaded by order. The outside world, also, is pervaded by order. Everyone is pervaded by order. Everyone's behavior, values, attitudes—all of them—are but expressions of their background, and the order is the connection between the expression and the background. That is the psychological order. Thus, the more you appreciate the order, which is universal, the more you recognize *Īśvara*. In that there is sanity. There you can accept yourself. How can anybody be secure and relaxed without accepting *Īśvara*? Therefore, in the *Bhagavadgītā* and elsewhere, Lord *Kṛṣṇa* says, "Those whose minds are in me . . . are always satisfied and joyful,"(BG 10.9); and "Be one whose mind is in me," (9.34; 18.65). In other words, bring more *Īśvara* into your life, for in truth, you are never away from that *Īśvara*. That makes you relax and trust because the one thing that is infallible is the order. Isn't that so? You can trust only this order, because only this order is infallible. This order also provides you with capacities and powers to neutralize the effects of circumstances that are not acceptable to you. Those means are given; they are within the order.

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> *The more you appreciate the order, the more you recognize Īśvara. In that there is sanity. How can anybody be secure and relaxed without accepting Īśvara?*

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Also, I can neutralize my own reactions to situations. So, without condemning myself, I can make my life comfortable and sane.

This all-encompassing order is the only *Īśvara* you can accept. It is folly to accept any other *Īśvara*, yet you need not condemn others for the concepts they hold. I am not at all giving you sanction to condemn anyone because of their beliefs. But then, this is the only God that will withstand scrutiny, when all that is here is this God. I don't have the burden of proving it when the Veda tells me that all that is here is *Īśvara*, and I see it. Although I can prove it is true, you bear the burden of proving it is not true if you don't see it. If you don't understand this, then it is up to you to try to understand and see. Without trying to understand, if you say that there is no such God, then you have the burden of proving that. And I would like to listen to your arguments. Then I can show you where the problem is, because there is nothing to believe here. There is something to know. When I say that all that is here is *Īśvara*, it is something to be understood, not believed. A concept or object that requires your belief need not be real. However, when something can be understood, when something can be known, there is reality. It is not a matter for speculation.

Your subjectivity, which comes from your fears and insecurity, is lessened. The less subjective you are, the more you are with Īśvara.

All that is here is *Īśvara*. The more you recognize that Lord, the more trusting you are. The more trusting you are, the more sane you are. That is to say, you can relax, you can be objective. Your subjectivity, which comes from your fears and insecurity, is lessened. The less subjective you are, the more you are with *Īśvara* and that means you are objective. This is the Vedic vision of God. We can ill afford to miss that vision.

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